

GP L1: Can We Inquire? Meno's Paradox of Inquiry

1. Context in which Meno's Paradox Arises

- Socrates' and Meno's inquiry into virtue
- Exemplifies general pattern of Socratic inquiries; cf. e.g. *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides* (the 'Socratic Dialogues')
- Socrates' disavowal of knowledge; Meno's reduction to perplexity.

2. Meno's Paradox of Inquiry

- Meno's question, **T2**: inquiry in the absence of knowledge. Two problems: (i) how to begin/procedural problem; (ii) how to finish/recognition problem
- Socrates' argumentative version, **T3**: where X is the object of inquiry, (i) One either knows X or does not know X; (ii) If one knows X, one cannot inquire into X; (iii) If one does not know X, one cannot inquire into X; thus, (iv) Inquiry into X is impossible.

3. Is Socrates' argument any good?

- the paradox is broken-backed: (ii) requires fat conception of knowledge (= knowing all about); (iii) requires thin conception (not knowing = knowing nothing about)
- but leaves questions: what are the preconditions upon inquiry? what must be true of us such that we are capable of inquiry? and what explains our being in a position to do so?

4. Socrates' answer: (i) a thesis about learning

- thesis: learning is recollection of knowledge soul had prior to embodiment, **T4**

- does this solve the problem? can't we just recast the problem in terms of recollection?

5. Socrates' answer: (ii) the demonstration - a model of inquiry

- key points: (i) slave does not know answer at start; (ii) Socrates asks questions and does not provide answers; (iii) demonstration mirrors pattern of Meno's & Socrates' conversation; NB slave gets puzzled (**T6**).

- two components to answer: (i) role of puzzlement (on which more next time); (ii) presence within us of true beliefs, which can be brought to awareness, and which can be turned into knowledge through repetition of process.

6. The role of the demonstration & the thesis in answering the paradox

- the preconditions on inquiry & a theory as to how we come to satisfy them

TEXTS

The lead in to Meno's qu.

[T1] (M) Socrates, even before meeting you I used to hear that all that you do is be puzzled yourself and make others puzzled. And now, at any rate as it seems to me, you are bewitching me and mixing your potions and absolutely bringing me under your spell, so that I am completely full of puzzlement. Indeed, if one must indulge in a little banter, both in looks and in everything else you strike me as just like the flat sea fish, the sting ray. For it strikes numb anyone it approaches and touches, and I think you've done something similar to me. Truly I am numb of mind and mouth and I have no answer for you. And yet I have given many speeches about virtue on countless occasions, and they were jolly good ones in my view. Now, however, I am utterly

unable to say what it is. I certainly think you're well advised not to travel and go abroad: if you were to act like this as a visitor in a foreign country, you'd soon be arrested as a wizard.

(S) You're a cunning chap, Meno, and you almost caught me out.

(M) Meaning what, Socrates?

(S) I know why you came up with an image for me.

(M) Really? Why, do you suppose?

(S) So that I'll come up with one for you in return. This I know about all beautiful people - that they love being likened to things - because they do well by it; because, I suppose, images of beautiful people are beautiful too. But I'm not going to come up with an image for you in return. And as for myself, if the sting ray makes other numb in the process of numbing itself, then I am like it: but if not, I am not. For I don't make others puzzled while being clearheaded myself. Rather, I am more puzzled than anyone and that's how I make others puzzled. And the situation now regarding virtue is that I don't know what it is; and you, while perhaps you did know, before you came into contact with me, you are now just like one who does not know. Nonetheless I'm willing to consider the matter together with you and to make a joint inquiry into what it might be.

(79e7-80d4)

Meno's Question

[T2] (M) But Socrates, in what way will you inquire into this thing about which you know not at all what it is? Which of the things you don't know will you put forward as the object of your inquiry? Further, even supposing you should happen upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know? (80d5-8)

Socrates' 'contentious' version

[T3] (S) I understand what you mean to say, Meno. Do you see what a contentious argument you are bringing down on us: that it's not then possible for a person to inquire either into what he knows or into what he does not know? For he wouldn't [or couldn't] inquire into what he knows, at any rate - for he knows it and such a person has no need for inquiry; nor could he [would he] inquire into what he does not know - for he doesn't know what to inquire into. (80e1-5)

Recollection: the thesis

[T4] (S) ... Since, then, the soul is immortal and has been born many times and has seen everything both here and in Hades, there is nothing it has not learnt. And thus it is no wonder that it can recollect what it knew before both about virtue and about other things. For since all nature is akin, and the soul has learnt all things, there is nothing to prevent a person who recollects just one thing - what men call 'learning' - from discovering everything else, if a person is courageous and doesn't tire of inquiry: for inquiry and learning are entirely recollection. So there's no need to succumb to that contentious argument: for that would make us lazy and it's music to the ears for those who are weak of will; whereas this one makes us energetic and keen to inquire. (81c5-e1)

Recollection: the demonstration with the slave - some key stages

[T5] (S) Do you see, Meno, how I'm not teaching him anything, but everything is my asking questions? And at present he thinks he knows what kind of line an eight foot square will come from? (82e4-6)

& ... (S) Then, observe him recollecting in order, in the way one must recollect. (82e12-13)

[T6] (B) By God, Socrates, I certainly don't know.

(S) Again, Meno, are you taking in what stage of his recollection he's now arrived at? That, at first, he didn't know what the baseline of the eight foot figure is, just as he doesn't yet know now; but at that time, he certainly thought he knew, and answered confidently in the manner of one who knows, and he didn't think he was puzzled. Now, however, he does think he's puzzled, and just as he doesn't know, nor does he think he knows. (M) You're right.

(S) And isn't he now better off regarding the thing which he doesn't know?

(M) That also seems right to me.

(S) Well then, in making him puzzled and in numbing him like a sting ray, have we done him any harm? (M) I don't believe so.

(S) In fact we've done him a service, it seems, towards finding out what is the case. For now, not knowing, he'll gladly inquire; whereas then he readily thought himself able to speak well to a large audience on frequent occasions on the matter of the double figure, and how it must have a line twice the length. (M) So it seems.

(S) So do you think that he would have attempted earlier to inquire into or learn this thing which he thought he knew, but didn't, before he fell into puzzlement on coming to think he doesn't know and came to desire to know?

(M) No, I don't think so, Socrates.

(S) Then he has profited from being numbed?

(M) I believe so.

(S) Then watch what, from this state of puzzlement, he will discover, in making his inquiry with

me, while I do nothing but ask questions, and do not teach. You keep a look out in case you ever find me teaching and instructing him, instead of drawing out his own opinions through questioning. (84a1-d2)

[T7] (S) What do you think, Meno? Has he answered with any opinion that wasn't his own?

(M) No, they were his own.

(S) And he certainly didn't know, as we said a little earlier.

(M) True.

(S) But these opinions were within him, were they not?

(M) Yes.

(S) Then in someone who doesn't know, regarding whatever he doesn't know, there are within him true opinions regarding the things he doesn't know?

(M) So it appears.

(S) And at present these opinions have been stirred up within him as though in a recent dream.

But if someone were to ask him questions on these same matters many times and in many ways, know that he will finish up knowing about these matters as accurately as anyone. (85b8-d1)